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EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. *This paper covers the provoking topic of European identity and Otherness, focusing on the role of alterity in shaping the identity of Europe. The article falls in several parts: initially, it engages with discussing the main theoretical perspectives on the concept of identity as highlighted in the current literature. The following section presents the trends regarding the presence or the absence of a European identity. The final part reveals the relationship between the European identity and Otherness, with an emphasis on the influence that alterity may have in generating the premises for creating a common European sense of belonging.*

Keywords: *EU, identity of Europe, alterity, multiple identities*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, within the process of constant change and reconfiguration of the political, economic and socio-cultural surrounding, the quest for national and transnational identity has intensified. Also, in the context of the creation and further enlargement of the EU, the people within the states of Europe are confronted with a growing need to legitimize and redefine their identity as well as their position. Therefore, the academic debate on identity (in general) and on European identity (in particular) has become a topical subject for researchers in different fields, from anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and historians to geographers, psychologists and philosophers. Although the debate on Europe has become multidisciplinary, the literature does not provide clear answers to the questions raised by the European issues. In this context, questions such as: “What is (European) identity?”, “How does the European

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identity (if experienced) function in relation to other components of human identity?”, “To what extent does the presence of the *Other* generate the creation of a common European sense of belonging?” remain open and require further clarification.

Thus, these questions can be seen as a starting point for the present paper which, in the first section, briefly presents the most common theoretical directions in the current research on identity. Then, it highlights the diverse competing claims regarding the existence of a European identity, focusing on the most recent findings in the literature that discuss European identities in the plural. The last part of the paper approaches the relationship between European identity and *Otherness*, which is said to create the prerequisites for a common European identity.

2. In search of identity. Common theoretical trends in current research

In the recent years, the notion of identity has been extremely studied by sociologists, historians and political scientists. Therefore, the concept has come to cover “such a variety of things that it makes no sense to ask what it really means” (Kamphausen, 2006: 24). While identity debates have become “the province of nearly all disciplines in the social sciences and arts” (Wintle, 2000: 12), therefore commonplace in current research (Craib, 1998; Brubaker, Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2000; Wintle, 2000: 12-14; De la Rúa, 2007: 683-684, 687-690; Aguilar, Francisco, 2009: 551-552, 560-567 etc.), there is no unified vision on what identity means, how it is formed or which are the factors that determine the development and the evolution of individual and collective identities. However, there are some generally accepted approaches in the study of identity, which fundamentally influenced recent research. These were mentioned in the introductory part of *Discourse and Identity* (De Fina et al., 2006: 1-3) and briefly discussed in the following.

A first theoretical perspective on identity that provides a basis in approaching and interpreting this phenomenon is social constructionism (Berger, Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1985; Haar, 2002: 15-44). It launches the assumption that identity is not a natural given, nor a product that is subject to acts of individual will; rather, it is formed by social processes and reshaped by social relations (Berger, Luckman, 1966: 194). Promoters of this new theory reject the cartesian notion of the individual seen as a unit consisting of rationality and freedom of choice. They also reject essentialist interpretations according to which individuals have unique and integral identities or the formation of collective identities based on a set of features shared by all members of a community. Constructionists instead talk about realities which

are socially constructed and not given (Berger, Luckman, 1966: 13), about identity as “linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups” (Kroskrity, 2000: 111), about multiple, fragmented identities. They see identity as a process subject to change, constructed and renegotiated in interaction, when individuals accentuate the various layers of their identity at a time, choosing and oscilating between their multiple identitifications. These ideas have been fundamental for the recent turn in the contemporary research on identity which dropped the understanding of identity as a prerogative of the individual or as function of one’s beliefs and feelings (De Fina, 2003: 16). Briefly, social constructionism has contributed to directing scholars’ attention to social action and interaction by means of which “the reality of everyday life is shared with others” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 35).

Another generally accepted view is that identity is a process always embeded in (signifying) social practices (De Fina et al., 2006: 14 *apud* Foucault, 1984), in which discursive practices have a central role (Fairclough, 2003: 10). Social and discursive practices organize, and often define how individuals and groups appear to others, negotiate roles and conceptualize themselves. In this context, we can understand Butler’s reflections: “Identity is not a category at all for her”, but rather “a semiotic activity whereby individuals are made to make cultural ‘sense’” (*quoted* in Bucholtz, Liang, Sutton, 1999: 7). Therefore, considering the process of “practice” as fundamental to processes of identity formation requires a closer look to how the definitions of identity evolve and change over time and space, and also to how membership (in a grup, a nation, a culture) is established, discussed or negotiated in the context of new social boundaries and locations (De Fina et al., 2006: 14).

A third common trend in identity studies was the development of the so-called anti-esentialist view of the self, which opposes to considering identity as a category that individuals inhabit. Gender studies (Bucholtz et al., 1999) contributed to the post-modern rejection of the self understood as something owned by people, as a category fixed by genetic inheritance and representing an intrinsic feature, a kind of essence of the person. Instead, they argued that membership in particular communities and the identities they authorize is achieved rather than assigned (Bucholtz et al., 1999: 8). As Wintle (2000: 13) argues, identities “are largely to do with nurture, not nature”, being defined rather by culture than by genes. Moreover, anti-essentialist researchers have shown that individuals can display “polyphonic” identities (Barrett, 1999: 318); that is, they can mobilize simultaneous “voices” that are associated with different categories of identity. In other words, they can be very distinct from what their “vizable” features may suggest, concluding that there is nothing natural or given in being part of a social category or grup.

The last common approach in the debate on identity (the one that constitutes the core of this paper) has centered on analysing processes of classification and on defining membership. During the past two decades scholars have increasingly discussed and conceptualised “identity” as a perception of *self* in relation to the *others* (Turner et al., 1987, Shore, 1993, Neumann, 1999, Mummendey and Waldzus, 2004, Staszak, 2008, Fligstein, 2009). A common point in these writings is that identity can be viewed as a process of classification, of self-categorization and self-understanding, as “a network of feelings of belonging to and exclusion from human subgroups” (Bruter, 2005: 8). In different words, people’s perceptions of themselves are constructed in relation to elements of the outside world (Mummendey and Waldzus, 2004: 466). Or, as Fligstein puts it, “our idea of who we are, is usually framed as a response to some ‘other’ group” (2009: 135).

In the modern times, identity does not exist as such, as a simple, static “thing”. Rather, it is a complex phenomenon, which is always constructed (according to the individual’s social and physical environment) and situated in the middle of a stream of rival or competing cultural discourses. Recent approaches have demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between „identity projects, social requirements and personal possibilities” (Calhoun, 1994: 14).

3. Is there such a thing as a European identity?

Europe is a very complex, dynamic and diverse continent, with plenty of histories and myths, therefore discussing the concept of European identity may prove really challenging. Moreover, as Europe is usually conceived as both, the continent as a whole and the politico-economic structure known as the EU, things become even more complicated. It is a fact that when asked things related to their identity, the people within Europe don’t know whether to identify mainly with the continent as such (perceived in geographical, historical or cultural terms) or with the EU-institutions.

The debate around the concept of “European identity” has generated a growing interest and amount of research in various academic disciplines. The current literature dedicated to this subject brings into full light several competing claims regarding the existence of the European identity. On the one hand, it is perceived as a continuous process, an entity that is growing progressively and can no longer be denied. In this sense, Ruxandra Trandafoiu considers European identity to be “a well established, alive and more desirable than ever presence” (2006: 91), while Michael Wintle affirms: “[...] enough has been said and agreed, for now, for us to take as given that a European identity exists” (2011: 2). On the other hand, there are scholars who demonstrated empirically that a sense of European identity has begun to develop lately and

that increasing numbers of Europeans identify in one way or another with Europe and the European community (Bruter, 2005: 150-165, Risse, 2010, Udrea, Corbu, 2011: 159-161). Following Bruter, we can say that a mass European identity has progressively emerged over the past thirty years and continues to grow nowadays (2005: 166). In the same line, Risse considers that, at present, an important percent of European citizens “incorporate Europe into their sense of identity”, and that they hold “Europeanized national identities, if only as a secondary identity” (2010: 5).

At the same time, many academics continue to be skeptical and affirm that European identity is rather a theoretical construction than a “reality” (Georgiadis, Zisimos, Efstathiou, 2006: 1 *apud* Jones, 1996, Ferencová, 2006: 4, Kamphausen, 2006: 24), just as Europe “has always been more of a mental construct than a geographical or social entity” (Lowenthal, 2000: 314). A common thesis in research presents the “gap between the institutional development of Europe and the sense of belonging to a European identity” (Beciu, 2004: 287). This is a striking difference in both countries aspiring to the Union and Member States. In other words, despite its unique history of success, the EU “is still far from its citizens” (Pawel Karolewsky, Kaina, 2006: 11). The lack of public identification with the EU is essentially linked, on the one hand, to the lack of communication and discursive structures that make political community possible (Trandafoiu, 2006: 94 *apud* Ward, 2002: 18), and, on the other hand, to “the lack of transparency in its procedures” (Fligstein, 2009: 132). Although many of its early leaders may have hoped to unify the “hearts and minds” of the Europeans, after more than five decades since the European project began, there is little evidence of public solidarity across Europe, and there are mixed feelings about being European. EU is now seen as an economic and political entity, “trying to foster its own identity and citizenship” (Bruter, 2005: x), as “an emerging transnational space” (Eriksen, 2007: 21), as “a soft power, inclined to employ civilian rather than military instruments in the field of crisis prevention and conflict management” (Duna, 2009: 12). But this does not involve any wider cultural or affective meaning. In common terms, the EU can be understood as a “less cohesive community” and, especially as “a Union of deep diversity” (Fossum, Schlesinger, 2007: 10), an “intra-cultural project” (Santagostino, 2008: 89) still not capable of arousing popular attachment, unlike the state which “remains the final term of reference” (Pagden, 2002: 2), “the cultural and political norm” (Smith, 1992: 58). It seems that for the time being, the ethnic and national levels of identification continue to be vivid and take priority, remaining much more prominent and accessible to the population than the more abstract regional identities such as the European one.

Furthermore, recent writings have shown that in contemporary Europe, instead of one strong European identity we come across a multiplicity of European identities which complement and enrich each other successfully,

being “neither defined primordially from within, nor simply imposed politically from without” (Katzenstein, Checkel, 2009: 226). They could be understood, academics prove, as both social processes and political projects, involving ordinary citizens as well as elites. Put differently, ongoing social processes (like common media discourses, daily practice, institutions) related to the lived experiences of Europeans (shopping in supermarket chains, participating in shared sporting competitions, watching song contests or football championships) as well as the elites and their political projects play key-roles in crafting Europe’s identities (Katzenstein, Checkel, 2009: 213-227). Therefore, entrepreneurs and elites working in Brussels, Strasbourg, Amsterdam, Luxembourg and other national settings, together with anti-globalization Euro-skeptics or critics of the EU enlargement process, pro-European academics, politicians and journalists, xenophobic nationalists, and the wide European public, they are all involved in shaping European identities which are “in a constant process of modernization and updating” (Trandafoiu, 2006: 92).

Moreover, as some studies have often revealed, people have “multiple identities” (Smith, 1992, 1993, Wilson, Donnan, 1998: 13, Marcussen *et al.*, 2001: 103, Chechel, Katzenstein, 2009). These identities articulate different but coexisting senses of self, among which local, regional, national or supra-national and even global ones. In the light of this finding we can assume that Europeans also display many identifications, depending on the specific context and the various roles that they play. The different elements of their social identity coexist in a sort of equilibrium and may become prominent according to time, place or situation. This implies, among other things, that they can feel both members of their nation, of their ethnic or religious group and of the wider European Union. Thus, these identities are considered to be “fluid” and “flexible” (Smith, 1993: 129), “contextual” and “situational” (Smith, 1992: 59; Brubaker, Cooper, 2000: 14) as, nowadays, more and more people are exposed to various experiences as a direct consequence of traveling, mass communications, and increased social interaction. In other words, the European identity may be defined as a “multilevel identity” which “does not exclude or deny other “identities”, other “loyalties”, from local ones to national ones, from the “Western” one to the “Atlantic” one” (Varsori, Petricioli, 2004: 90).

From this regard, identity can be seen as a “social construction” (Jenkins, 2000: 12; Shin, Jackson, 2003: 212), rather than a static, pre-given characteristic. Being “not a pure fact, nor a simple phenomenon” (Ferencová, 2006: 5), identity represents a process of constant change and negotiation with the people around us, being mainly “constructed” through interaction and institutionalization (Jenkins, 2000: 12). And European identity, like all social and cultural identities, could be understood in the same terms.

Considering the focus of this paper, that of understanding and defining identity in terms of the dichotomy *self* versus *other*, we may say that European identity necessarily involves a process of differentiation with regard to alterity. But who Europe's (internal and/or external) "otherness" is and to what extent does its presence forge in individuals a common sense of identification with the European Community?

4. Europeanness versus Otherness

In the dynamic contemporary world of increased traveling and social interaction, a world "whose primary dimension is mobility" (Mineva, 2007: 31), and where "state borders are increasingly obsolete" (Wilson, Donnan, 1998: 1), questions like "Who we really are?", "What is/are our identity/identities?" prove to be highly actual. Also, in today's Europe, questions like "Who are the Europeans and what are their specific features (if any), that are not replicated elsewhere?" remain of constant interest. Over the past decades, researchers have tried to identify those characteristics and qualities that differentiate Europe and Europeans from anybody else, but findings showed that the areas supposed to reveal unifying European characteristics (territory, history, religion, law, education, media system etc.) equally proved to separate the peoples within Europe (for an overview see Udrea, Corbu, 2010: 71-74). Likewise, as highlighted in the previous section of the paper, despite the ever increasing debate on "what European identity stands for", researchers haven't reached a commonly accepted definition of the concept. However, what seems to be a point in academic research on identity is the fact that European identity, like all the other layers of human identification is rather forged out in relation to *alterity*. In different words, the values and characteristics that are common to all Europeans, despite their regional, national or local differences become prominent as opposed to those of significant *others*.

Thus, as already mentioned previously, in the context of the present paper "European identity" will be approached in relation to "Otherness" which, following Staszak, could be defined as "the result of a discursive process by which a dominant group ("Us", the Self) constructs one or many out-groups ("Them", the Others), by stigmatizing a real or imagined difference, presented as a motive of discrimination" (2008: 2). The reason in choosing this approach lays in the rich literature dedicated to otherness as a source of identity construction (Shore, 1993; Neumann, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Georgiadis, Zisimos, Efstathiou, 2006; Staszak, 2008 etc.). Although academics in this line of argument stress different aspects of identity, a common point in their writings seems to be that identity is a process of classification and categorization that

creates meaningful boundaries, a process which organizes *our* relationships to *other* individuals and groups.

Therefore, identity defines not only an in-group but also one or several out-groups. That is, the sense of community among members of a social group is accentuated by a sense of distinctiveness or differentiation with regard to *other* social groups. As Chris Shore puts it, “in order to define *us*, there must be a corresponding *them*, against which we come to recognize ourselves as different” (1993: 782). Or, in Jonathan Friedman’s words (1991) “we become egos via the internalisation of significant others’ s objectification of ourselves” (*quoted in* Neumann, 1999: 5).

The existence of the *Other* allows humanity to be divided into at least two groups: one that represents the norm, the rule, and whose identity is valued, and another, defined by its faults, discriminated and devalued. *Other-ness* and *we-ness* are, thus, two inseparable sides of the same coin. The *Other* only exists relative to the *Self* and vice versa. Moreover, the *Other* is not simply the opposite of the *Self*; the *Other* is “the one whom we may not understand, but whom we cannot help meeting” (Mineva, 2007: 35). Consequently, “neither the personal nor the human exist completely independently and isolated from the *Other*” (Mineva, 2007: 38).

Another important aspect is that the notion of “otherness” is operationalized differently throughout the literature. Over time, the *Others* have been embodied by the barbarians, the savages, the peoples of color, the migrants etc. Sometimes *otherness* was essentially religious (Christians versus Non-Christians or, within Europe, Western Christendom (Catholic and Protestant) as opposed to Eastern Orthodoxy); sometimes it was only geographical – “the other is who lives on the other side of the frontier” (Horga, Anglițoiu, 2011: 164). People used and still use to think that we, here, are the *Self* while they, there are the *Others*. People who are far away are usually considered as radically different, as *Others*, and this happens because “geography is a remarkably effective producer of *otherness*” (Staszak, 2008: 6). In Staszak’s conception, territorial constructions allow the opposition between the *Self* and the *Other* to be maintained or accentuated. At the same time, very often the *other* was not defined in geographical terms, but in cultural ones. Minorities, those groups of people “belonging to the same political community, but unified by a different cultural code” (Horga, Anglițoiu, 2011: 164) were and continue to be increasingly perceived as *internal others*.

In relation to the ideas above, we can argue that Europe, as well, has been constituted “by an ongoing construction of difference with regard to a respective other” (Kamphausen, 2006: 25). In different words, *Europeanness* defines itself better by reference to *Otherness*.

The construction of Europe has depended on the parallel construction of “others” (Baycroft, 2004; Katzenstein, Chechel, 2009; Crețu, Udrea, 2011), against which a separate European identity is seen as being created, invented or sometimes simply taken for granted. “Europe’s *other* was, in fact, a variety of others”, “representing an entire range of degrees or types of difference according to the circumstances” (Baycroft, 2004: 157). In addition to the Soviet Union (until the fall of Communism) and the Cold War protagonists, the “disaggregated Third World” was a possible candidate to oppose a “uniting” Europe (Smith, 1992, 75-6). Also, in the past, the *Other* has traditionally been located to the East (Triandaffylidou, 2008) and “taken on either religious or civilizational forms” (Katzenstein, Chechel, 2009: 224). Historically, both Turkey and Russia were seen as “barbarian others”, increasingly coming to be portrayed as a threat to Western values and ideals, thus serving for centuries as European identity builders. Even today, Europe’s relations to each of them remain deeply contested. At the same time, there are authors that underline the part played by the United States of America as the definitive alterity of Europe (Habermas, 2001).

Though, most of the times, Europeans may not have known who they were and with which Europe to identify, they did know exactly who they were not, and with whom not to identify – the Ottoman and Muscovite empires to the East (socially constructed as opposing to liberal values central to European identity), the peoples of color, the migrators (in search of a job and better conditions of life) or the Muslims (for an overview about different ideological currents and movements of Islamism and their impact on the European cultures see Lazăr, 2009). This leads us to Shore’s conclusion that, very often, “people affirm their identity by defining who they are not” (1993: 782). Therefore, in a Europe unable to generate (at least for the time being) a strong sense of collective self, one important source of its identity lies in its interaction with significant *others* (Triandaffylidou, 2008: 280).

5. Summary and conclusions

After more than half of century since the beginning of the European unification project, the development of a genuine European identity is still questionable. Today, the identity of Europe continues to remain uncertain and imprecise, despite the fact that, in the recent years, a growing number of scholars have shown deep interest in the European issues.

Regarding the very existence of this phenomenon, the findings in the literature are the most diverse. If some views claim that this concept cannot be operationalized, and that it is rather theoretical, there are academics who sustain the idea that increasing numbers of European citizens identify themselves with

Europe in certain contexts. On the other hand, a common trend in current research underlies the fact that European identity, like all identities, can be forged out in opposition to alterity. Put differently, the sense of belonging to a common identity of Europe can be accentuated by a sense of distinctiveness to a representative *other*, defined either geographically, historically, religiously or culturally. In this sense, the European identity can be understood as a relational process, shaped by reference to and social interaction with *others*.

In a world where spatial and cultural borders become increasingly permeable, it is important that identity issues remain a point of discussion. At the same time, although nowadays there are various forces and claims that fragment the possibility of a strong European sense of belonging, the identity of Europe should be constantly brought to the foreground and analyzed (both theoretically and empirically) as a big step towards a positive future of Europe.

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